

# OLD TIME MILL

## THE HISTORY OF MILLING IN THE RED RIVER

Chas. N. Bell in Northwest Miller.

We have to go a long way back in time, comparatively speaking, to review the introduction of wheat growing to the valley lands of the Red River of the North. A few words on farming of any kind, undertaken on the banks of the Red river will not be out of place here. The fur traders of the Northwest Fur Co. had established posts on the upper Red river, in the neighborhood of the spot where now stands the town of Grafton, as early as 1800, and the employees of the Hudson's Bay Co. soon followed them. The Northwest company was a Canadian concern, with its headquarters at Montreal, their means of transport being confined to the bark canoe. The Hudson's Bay Co. supplied its Red river posts from Albany House, on James' bay, though its most important post was at York Factory, on the west shore of Hudson's bay. The latter place supplied all the posts north of Lake Winnipeg and on the Saskatchewan river.

From the old journal of a partner of the Northwest company, I find that on the 17th of May, 1801, Alexander Henry, the partner mentioned, proceeded to the east side of the Red river, opposite the mouth of the Pembina river, and on what is now the site of St. Vincent, he planted "thirty small potatoes," which had been brought from the fur trading post of the company at Portage la Prairie on the Assiniboine river. Here was the site of a former post of the Northwest company built about 1798 by one Peter Grant. On this same day Henry established Fort Pembina, which has been the

### CENTRAL POINT FOR SETTLEMENT

in that locality ever since. The fort here was situated "on the north side of the Pembina river, on the point of land between that and the Red river, about one hundred paces from each." On the 3rd of October, Henry took from his garden patches one and a half bushels of potatoes.

Continuously after 1801 crops were raised at Pembina, and curiously enough, the next year Henry gives us a report of his garden produce that fully equals anything in the crop report line that emanates from the imaginative brain of a Dakota editor. On the 30th of October, 1802, he wrote: "I took in my potatoes, 420 bushels, the produce of seven bushels, exclusive of the quantity we have eaten since our arrival, (from Lake Superior at the yearly gathering of the traders), and what the Indians must have stolen, which must be at least 200 bushels more. I measured the circumference of an onion, which was 22 inches. A carrot was 18 inches long and at the thick end it measured 14 inches in circumference. A turnip, with its leaves, weighed 25 lbs." etc.

The next list of his vegetables given was in 1804, when, in addition to the coarse roots, he had cucumbers, melons, squashes and Indian corn. This is the first mention I find made in the old records of any grain, though, from another journal, I find that the Red River Indians, prior to 1809, regularly resorted to the Missouri River to trade with the Mandans for corn. In 1806 oats were sown at Pembina.

### APPARENTLY FOR THE FIRST TIME,

and the Indians at the mouth of the Red River were also growing corn, the seed having been supplied to them the previous year. It was not until the year 1812 that barley is recorded as forming part of a yearly crop raised at the permanent posts of the fur companies.

In 1812 the first batch of emigrants was sent out via Hudson's Bay to the Red River by Lord Selkirk, a Scottish nobleman, who had secured control of a ma-

jority of the stock of the Hudson's Bay Co., and voted himself a tract of land bordering on the Red and Assiniboine rivers, in the present State of Minnesota, Territory of Dakota, and Province of Manitoba, comprising in all some 110,000 square miles. Lord Selkirk aimed at establishing a colony on the banks of the Red River which would serve to break up the fur-trading operations of the Northwest company as well as provide a home for the evicted Highlanders, who, driven from their holdings were forced to emigrate. For several years after 1812 successive parties of emigrants from Scotland, Ireland and Switzerland, arrived at the colony, and wheat now became one of the leading articles of production. The seed wheat appears to have been brought out from England, and certainly barley was introduced from Great Britain at an early date in

### THE HISTORY OF THE SETTLEMENT.

The colonists were all settled on the Red River immediately to the north of the present city of Winnipeg, but owing to the scarcity of provisions frequently passed the winters at Pembina, when on the south side of the Pembina River, and opposite to the Northwest Company's post, they had established a fort, or collection of log houses, which went by the name of Fort Daer, being called so after Lord Selkirk, who was also Baron Daer. Trouble soon arose between the governor of the colony, who had been appointed by Lord Selkirk, and the officers of the Northwest Fur Co. One acted to another, and the result was, first, that in 1815 the Northwesters induced the great majority of the Selkirk people to emigrate to Upper Canada, and second, in 1816, to an encounter between the rivals, which ended in the death of Gov. Semple and 20 of his Selkirk servants, while the Northwesters lost only one man. The remaining colonists were driven away to Lake Winnipeg, and their fields, houses, etc., nearly all destroyed, but Lord Selkirk pushed up from Canada with a large band of discharged soldiers and in turn drove off the Northwesters. The British government then interfered, and the settlement grew and flourished, and was strengthened by the coalition of the fur companies in 1820-21.

In 1826 there was a great flood throughout the length and breadth of the Red river valley. The dwellings, barns and fences of the settlers, with the forts of the Hudson's Bay Co., were swept away. Left homeless, and almost, starving, the settlers were driven to despair, and when the waters subsided, in the middle of June, the majority of them, including nearly all the De Meurons and Swiss, decided to abandon the Red river country. Accordingly on the 23rd of June a party comprising 242 persons of both sexes and all ages, started for Fort Snelling, where, after passing safely through the territory of the warlike Sioux, they arrived in good time and settled down.

### THE REMAINING COLONISTS

set to work to rebuild their houses, and notwithstanding the lateness of the season, sowed what seed wheat they had saved from the flood, and later on reaped a most bountiful harvest. From that day to this the land then broken has been almost annually sown in wheat and produced luxuriant crops without in any way, as far as is apparent, losing any of its power.

It will be seen, then, that the settlement began on the lower or most northerly portion of the Red River Valley, and it was not until a full half century later that any wheat was raised on the lands of Northern Minnesota and Dakota, where, within a few years after, the "iron horse" made its appearance in all directions, to take in

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which grows up after their arrival.

Having followed the course of grain cul-  
tivation in the "new northwest" let us  
turn back to the days when the noise of  
the flour mill was just heard in the land,  
where now many a stately and substan-  
tial structure, containing rollers and

### OTHER MODERN MACHINERY.

supplies the wants of the settlers. There  
is no reason to doubt that the Selkirk set-  
tlers, on their arrival in the Red river  
country in 1812, were the first persons in  
this district who raised wheat and ground  
it into flour. With the original party of  
the colonists was brought out, from the  
Arkney Islands, some stone hand mills.  
One of these is now in the possession of  
the Manitoba Historical and Scientific  
society in Winnipeg. The mill is con-  
structed of two flat stones, circular in  
shape, about two feet in diameter, and  
each an inch and a half thick. Inserted  
in the centre of one is an iron pin, while  
the other has a circular hole cut through  
the centre, about three and a half  
inches in diameter, and crosswise,  
in which is placed a narrow bar of  
wood, having a hole bored through it  
to admit of the iron pin in the lower  
stone passing through it so that the upper  
one will revolve about it as an axis. A  
straight upright handle is inserted into  
the upper stone near its outer edge, and  
by this means the stone is turned around,  
while the grain to be ground is slowly  
poured into the whole in the centre, from  
whence it gradually works its way out-  
ward between the stones. Altogether it  
is a very primitive mill, and the settlers  
soon became dissatisfied with it, as I find  
in a book published in 1816 that there was,  
thirty years before, a mill (presumably work-  
ed by wind power) used by the settlers,  
which stood just about on the site where  
now is the

### LARGEST STEAM GRIST MILL

in northwest Canada. From this date on  
windmills were erected as the settlement  
spread along the banks of the Red and As-  
siniboine rivers. The ruins of several of  
them still stand, as relics of the past, with-  
in hearing of the sound of the steam  
whistles of larger roller mills. Nearly  
thirty years ago an enterprising miller  
constructed a dam across one of the num-  
erous prairie coulees that run into the Red  
river in the vicinity of the present city of  
Winnipeg, and by this means stored up  
sufficient water to run a water power grist  
mill during the spring and early summer  
months.

The first steam grist mill was in opera-  
tion about the year 1861, when Andrew  
McDermot, an ex-employee of the Hudson's  
Bay Co., and for years one of the com-  
pany's most active rivals in the local fur  
trade, erected in the village of Winnipeg  
a small mill, the machinery of which,  
bought in New York, was transported in  
carts from the then town of St. Paul  
to Fort Garry at a cost of five dollars  
per "piece" of ninety pounds weight.  
Another small steam grist mill was  
erected about the same time, a mile low-  
er down the Red river. It was not until  
1876 that mills of any considerable capac-  
ity were established on the banks of the  
Red river. In that year the Hudson Bay  
Co. and D. H. McMillan erected large  
mills, which have been enlarged from  
time to time since that date, and are now  
turning out flour for export. After the  
above date settlers poured into the Red  
river valley in Minnesota, Dakota and  
Manitoba, necessitating the erection of  
many mills at all the principal points of  
settlement.